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Vane, Jan

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Where Is the Sociology of Religion Heading? Some Comments to 'Three European Sociologies of Religion'

JAN VÁNĚ

Faculty of Philosophy and Arts,
University of West Bohemia, Plzeň

Zdeněk Nešpor's review 'Three European Sociologies of Religion' introduces us to the work of several authors (Furseth and Repstad 2006; Davie 2007; Nešpor and Lužný 2007) and their approaches to the sociology of religion. Let us briefly review the key points he makes in connection with the sociology of religion. First, there is the question of to what extent the difference between American and European sociology is constitutive for the sociology of religion and which of their virtues could enrich the discipline in the future. Second, the question is raised as to whether the sociology of religion needs any so-called grand theories or not. Third, there is a hint of a question about methodology and the topics that the sociology of religion should concentrate on. I would like to supplement these thoughts with several comments, which I believe add to the integrity of the view of the topic.

The growing influence of religion does indeed appear to grant legitimacy to the sociology of religion and justify its conviction of its own potential significance and importance. Therefore, there is room to hope that the discipline will not be marginalised and that it will 're-establish' itself as a sub-discipline among the 'more frequented' sociology sub-branches. However, the hope that the community of sociologists of religion might acquire a more acceptable status warrants some critical questioning.

I would like to focus on some topics that were discussed in the text and some topics that deserve attention but for no obvious reason were left out. First, and above all, I consider the question of the difference between European and American or between national sociologies of religion in general (to which a rather substantial amount of the text was devoted) to be a pseudo-problem. Although I agree with Nešpor's arguments in the reviewed article that these two dominant streams merge. I also think that a few more facts have yet to be mentioned. A careful examination of the content of texts on the sociology of religion shows that identifying differences among regions is generally a marginal matter [see Christiano, Swatos and Kivisto 2002; Dillon 2003; Fenn 2003], and at most it thrives on the peripheries of the discipline. If differences among regions are taken into consideration at all, then rather as evidence of historical development than as a relevant topic [see Cipriani 2000].

The attempts to explain the differences among national representations of the sociology of religion by documenting the differences between the Anglo-

American stream and the 'rest', that is, European sociology of religion, conform with the post-war situation generally, and possibly extending into the 1980s. Once globalisation became the dominant topic in the social sciences, this distinction faded, yet the main role is still played by American (Anglo-Saxon) sociology. Evidence for this can be found in the fact that the vast majority of all contemporary important authors studied or worked for some time at an American university. Therefore, I consider attempts to find constitutive differences in applications of the sociological study of religion to be an artificially created problem. Those differences may be interesting for historical description and for an explanation of the conceptual approach to the phenomenon of religion, but if this is not a 'delayed' reaction to 'overwhelming' diversity, then it is obscuring a more substantial problem – the causes behind the emergence of centres and peripheries and the relationship between them, a topic much less discussed, even though it has an essential impact on the development of the sociology of religion.

* * *

Nešpor rightly pays considerable attention to the question of whether or not it is necessary to have grand theories, such as religious market theory, rational choice theory or invisible religion theory, which would 'profile' the sociology of religion. This is inevitably related to the paradigms of the discipline. In particular the significance of the secularisation theory for the sociology of religion is in question. Nešpor defends the opinion that the secularisation thesis is difficult to grasp, but in fact it has already lost its cogency and potential. In other words, the contribution of grand theories is doubted, especially that of the unique secularisation thesis. At the same time, looking to other theoreticians for inspiration is understood as a questionable approach with an unpredictable impact on the picture and role of the sociology of religion. It is striking that Nešpor approaches the concept of secularisation as something that is totally 'worn out', as a thesis that should be quickly overcome so that the sociology of religion can move forwards (a view also backed by Davie [2007]). The concept of secularisation should be replaced with new ideas and methods; for example, Nešpor presents his humanistic approaches to the study of religion [Nešpor 2004].

I would like to reflect upon the dispute over the character and importance of the secularisation paradigm for the sociology of religion. Among sociologists of religion (but not just them, see also Taylor [2007]) the contemporary debate over its importance is also connected with the 'longing' for the possible or legitimate inclusion of the sociology of religion within the general theory of sociology. The question is how to do so when there is no grand theory or when it is failing. The impossibility of achieving this is explained in the following way: Having long promoted the secularisation paradigm, the sociology of religion deprived itself of a constitutive position in the general theory and contributed to the isolation of the sub-discipline. However, the sociology of religion must realise that every model that bases its legitimacy on the principle of a putative ability to see

through imaginary or delusive phenomena to capture the real essence of matters have become empty and weak. In other words, the approach of taking for granted one's ability to understand and interpret, in spite of the obstacles, should be definitively amended by the approach called 'the hermeneutics of suspicion'. This approach must be adopted even in cases that are presented as concepts of liberation from 'non-functioning' concepts.

The dispute over the validity and relevancy of the secularisation paradigm [e.g. Berger 1993, 1999: 1–18; Casanova 1994: 11–39] led gradually to a typology of secularisation and the declaration of this phenomenon as structured according to the different pace of secularisation at the social, organisational and individual levels [see, e.g., Dobbelaere 2002: 29–43]. The thesis of the fragmented nature of the secularisation process gradually prevailed, with some theoreticians agreeing that to explain the secularisation process it is not enough to make a 'simple' reference to modernisation processes (at least not in Europe). Challenging and denying the validity of the secularisation theory has led to the currently favourable and fashionable viewpoint wherein emphasis is put on the exceptional nature of the secularisation process in Europe, which is then understood as an 'anomaly', as an exception from the standard [e.g. Casanova 2007: 334]. What then is to be done with the secularisation paradigm?

There are texts that demonstrably show a deeper understanding of reality, for example, by taking into consideration various forms of causes of the occurrence and consequent modifications to the secularisation pace [see Himmelfarb 2005; Martin 2005; Taylor 2007]. However, the prevailing interpretation still seems to see secularisation as a self-fulfilling prophecy, which ceases to be constitutive. However, hasty or unreflecting rejection of the secularisation concept could be an act of self-destruction. It proves that rich countries are becoming more and more secular, while the world as such is more and more religious (see the empirical studies by Norris and Inglehart [2007: 217]). The reason is that religion has been strictly expelled from the business sphere and was left outside the gates of business people and international companies. Although economic globalisation is the only truly global process, it is so influential that it would be yet premature to abandon the secularisation thesis. Apart from this, rather than being a self-fulfilling prophecy it could be a self-non-fulfilling prophecy. Its 'non-fulfilling' occurs not because the secularisation concept is invalid but because behaviour (e.g. the behaviour of large churches) changed in reaction to it, and so did the constitutive forms of experiencing and acting. There is also the unanswered question of what if the spreading individualisation of religion leads to the same result as secularisation, and perhaps even more effectively; the influence of religion would continue to decrease, because individualised religiousness is incapable of providing something that is granted on the level of an institution – the ability to integrate.

Above I looked at the problem of the secularisation thesis in an attempt to demonstrate the following facts. First, abandoning the secularisation thesis has not been sufficiently justified. Second, and most importantly, it is primarily grand

theories that give rise to discussions, help refine the arguments on polemical points, and thus help the discipline to develop. To reject or disparage them in order to prevent the return of 'the great narratives' or the attempts to destroy them by post-modernity are counterproductive. Or more precisely, if there are more grand theories, problems occur only if they become a monomyth [Marquard 1981: 91–116] and they prevail as 'final vocabularies' [see Rorty 1989: 73]. In as much as it is possible to oppose them, they are necessary, and the call to overcome existing paradigms, including the incorporation of less developed narrative discourses, does not explain where the sociology of religion should really be heading when there is nothing for it to define itself against or to lean on. Reflections on mid-range theories are interesting, but they do not move the sociology of religion forward.

* * *

There is another point for consideration that unfortunately was lost sight of in 'Three European Sociologies of Religion': the dispute over the definition of religion (though the authors do focus on this issue in their monographs). The question of what can be included in this category is crucial. On one side, there is the substantive definition; on the opposite side, there is the functional definition, and both have their pros and cons [Christiano, Swatos and Kivisto 2002: 4–12]. At the centre of the dispute, which to a certain point seems counterproductive for the sociology of religion, is the overwhelming prevalence of the functionalist concept of religion. The sociology of religion cannot, obviously, approach religion as a complex of phenomena that are not derivable from the social context, and that makes the functionalist approach legitimate. The process of elaborating the functionalist approach to religion made it possible to arrive at other interpretations of social entities such as the concept of invisible religion [Luckmann 1967], which actually resembles the same problem as Marx's 'false consciousness'. The concept of invisible religion assumes that an individual, even in Western, secularised society, is in spite of all proclamations anchored in such forms of social condition that reveal a still religious nature, albeit in modified form [Luckmann 1967: 12]. In other words, notwithstanding the imaginings of individuals about their own interests and goals, there are still religious influences which keep exercising power over people. But as in the case of the secularisation paradigm, the arguments supporting the process of de-secularisation that refer to invisible religion create the suspicion that they are coming to represent the general view, which becomes conservative and has a tendency to produce evidence to prove its own validity. Generally put, the problem is not just the definition, but the need to answer the question about the epistemic possibilities of cognition. It is no wonder that sociology in general is peeping at neurology or more precisely bioscientific findings that could help interpret forms of religious cognition and actions.

In addition, the sociology of religion has thus far built upon the assumption that religion is not just a symptom of a change in society but also its cause.

However, as the globalisation process goes on, the existence and functioning of religion in the world are not questioned, but there is the question of whether religion still has any competent role in the integration of the society [Knoblauch 1999: 220]. If it were true that although religion exists in various forms on the individual level and it is not constitutive in influencing social institutions or the course of the world at all, then the sociology of religion would be heading to a point where it would be studying and creating a 'museum of curiosities'.

If this is not the case, the sociology of religion should be able to answer relevantly the following questions. First, why should anybody pay any attention to it? In other words, the sociology of religion wants to present itself as a systematically built discipline, which is able to provide a set of logically consistent analyses that would allow it to enter even interdisciplinary discussions. But concealed behind this assertion of itself is the ongoing dispute over the redefinition of the sociology of religion and sociology itself. In other words, the dispute concerns the initial assumptions and directions of sociology in general. Another question, therefore, is what are the 'new' possibilities of sociology? This is connected, for example, with an appeal for a deeper connection with other disciplines (such as anthropology or ethnology) and the need for wider use of qualitative methods or combined approaches [see Knoblauch 2003; Creswell 2003; Denzin and Lincoln 2005].

It has proven essential – considering the structural transfiguration of modernism – to re-define the initial presuppositions on which sociology was built. The positive expectations are demonstrated through the requirements of the sociologists of religion to have a greater share in forming not only sociology but the society as such. What the sociology of religion is pointing at is the fact that it depends on forms of self-understanding formed in modern societies. The call for interdisciplinarity and the demonstrative rejection of ethnocentrism (that even borders on flagellant self-criticism) is accompanied by appeals for the inclusion of non-American and non-European approaches. The desire for the acceptance of differentness runs up against a problem, in that attempts to include differentness approaches to the studies of modernism, postmodernism, globalisation, and fundamentalism (phenomena suggested as great topics for the sociology of religion), may be interesting and inspiring, they are still reflexive terms, even though constructed by the western world.

The main problems of the sociology of religion are not the plurality of approaches (the discipline has already become accustomed to it), ethnocentrism, the lack of grand theories, or the limited methodological means of studying particular cases. In fact, the discipline is really faced with the problem of its inability to decide which rationality/discourse type it has and is able to defend and which criteria will help assess the relevance of the rationalities adopted. Furthermore, there is a dispute over how to tell which approaches are appropriate – whether ontological, epistemological, methodological or axiological in nature – and which approaches already fall within the category of 'heretic' [see Feyerabend 2002]. The answer to this question may only be found in the relevant polemics, which

will, however, always figure on the centre-periphery axis of scientific institutions and opinions. Such a polemic can only be maintained with the aid of great theories/narratives, without which the sociology of religion cannot do if it is to maintain the interpretative capacity of social criticism. Last but not least, there is the question of applicability of the available methods.

As the phenomenon of religion is a sensitive topic in the contemporary world, the main question concerning the future picture of the sociology of religion is whether the sociology of religion will be able to resist ideological pressures and fashionable trends. In other words, all will depend on whether the sociology of religion can prove, defend and maintain its autonomy in an era when religion is primarily a political problem.

JAN VÁNĚ is assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of West Bohemia. He earned his doctoral degree at Masaryk university in Brno. His major field of study is the sociology of religion and political philosophy.

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